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ABSTRACT

This bulletin examines some questions that arise when children are not ready for promotion: Should they be retained? Who decides? Are there alternatives to retention? What is the effect of retention on the student? Despite research limitations, those who examine the studies on grade repetition say they show that grade retention does not have a positive effect either on academic achievement or on personal adjustment, and it is also expensive. Potential solutions being examined in schools are the following: (1) prevention programs to ensure the mastery of reading and mathematics; (2) when early intervention is not enough--assumptions to be re-examined; and (3) alternatives to retention, such as partial promotion to a "half-step" grade. A number of specific programs are briefly described. Seven Oregon school districts were contacted to determine their policies and practices concerning promotion and retention. Most of those interviewed say they focus more on prevention than on retention; consequently, the number of retained students is not considerable. School systems throughout the United States are beginning to question the practice of retention and to discuss the policy and administrative implications of such a change. The appendix contains sample policies concerning promotion and retention that are available from the Oregon School Boards Association and the National Association of School Psychologists. Appended is a 28-item bibliography and a list of the 11 persons interviewed. (MLF)

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ALTERNATIVES TO RETENTION

If Flunking Doesn't Work, What Does?

Anne Hill Thomas

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Preface

On paper it looks so tidy. A child enters first grade at age 6 and moves steadily ahead, each birthday marking a new grade level. At the end of the eighth grade, the youngster has mastered the expected skills and moves into high school.

Four years later, at age 18, he or she receives a high school diploma—a rite of passage. Choices open up: college, a job, marriage. The future looks rosy.

But educators have discovered the tidy theory doesn't always work. Some children just don't fit into the niches that have been outlined for them; they don't meet the standards for advancement, and their progress through the educational system encounters a red light while their classmates see green.

This Bulletin examines some questions that arise when children are not ready for promotion: Should they be retained? Who decides? Are there alternatives to retention? What is the effect of retention on the student?

As schools gear up for the Oregon Educational Act for the 21st Century, the concepts of promotion vs. retention will be scrutinized more closely. This Bulletin sets the stage for that discussion.

Anne Hill Thomas has a master's degree in journalism from the University of Oregon. She has teaching experience on the elementary, secondary, and collegiate levels and has worked for the Cottage Grove *Sentinel*, Ashland *Daily Tidings*, and *Springfield News*.

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Introduction

Whether it is a one-room country school, a middle-sized elementary school, or a large high school, the same problem eventually arises: What to do with students who are behind? Should they be promoted or held back?

Much depends upon the definition. What is behind? Who determines what behind is? How is the behindness measured?

For decades public education in the U.S. has been based on the premise that students can accomplish certain tasks by certain age levels. In today's average school, students enroll in the first grade at approximately age 6. Twelve grades later, if they progress as outlined through the various stages of curricula, they will graduate from high school at age 18. In actuality, variations in student learning emerge as soon as students walk through the door, and the variations often follow the youngsters through their entire school career. Some breeze through school, saying "Nothing to it," while others struggle to keep up and often lose the battle.

Age-Graded Schools Have Been Used for Decades

The concept of age-graded schools was introduced in the United States in the 1840s, but until the late 1800s schools were largely ungraded and heterogeneously grouped. Students generally moved ahead according to interviews and exhibits of work, rather than standardized testing (Massachusetts Board of Education 1990).

But as schooling became more important, as society shifted from an agrarian to a manufacturing economy, and as immigrants flooded the country, greater demands were put upon the public schools. Sorting students into levels by chronological age seemed more efficient.

The idea then evolved that passage from grade to grade should depend on whether students met academic standards. Curricula were developed that outlined those standards at each level, all leading to a high school diploma. If

students were unable to meet the standards, they were held in place until they could, a practice that proponents believed made a high school diploma more valuable (Massachusetts Board of Education).

In the 1800s students were often held back. In some cases, as many as 70 percent of all students were held back in any one year (Karweit 1991). Exact figures were kept in only a few instances, so it is difficult to know exactly what the rates of repetition were, but some examples show up. In Iowa in the early 1900s, for instance, about 50 percent of the students were retained each year (Karweit), a considerably higher figure than the national average retention rate for all grades at the turn of the century, which was 16 percent (Medway 1985).

In the early 1900s approximately 20 percent of students in U.S. public schools failed and were retained each year. Thus, within a typical group of thirty-five students an average of seven students would be retained each year for a total of thirty-five retentions during the first five years. Many students were retained twice before dropping out, and more than half of all children dropped out before completing elementary school. Fewer than 10 percent graduated from high school (Doyle 1989).

Retention rates varied widely from district to district in the early part of the twentieth century. A 1909 study showed that one Massachusetts school district retained 7.5 percent of its students, whereas a Tennessee district held back 75.8 percent (Karweit).

Then Came Social Promotion

Around the 1930s educators began to realize that the practice of retaining a student was harmful to his or her social and emotional development. The result was a new philosophy termed *social promotion*, in which students were passed along from one grade to the next based on the school calendar and the child's age, instead of skill achievement. This practice greatly reduced the rates of retention, but it raised a new question: What to do with students in the same grade level whose skill levels differed. The answer was to group or "track" students, and the number of dropouts increased (Karweit).

In recent years, especially since the 1983 report *A Nation at Risk*, the question of social promotion has been hotly debated. Schools generally returned to the practice of stricter retention, as pressure was put on them for increased accountability.

Social promotion did not die easily, however. Supporters had strong arguments to counteract its opponents. On one hand, those who opposed social promotion argued that promoting students without regard to achievement leads to high school students who read at elementary-grade levels and

that students would be more motivated to learn if their promotions were based on merit. Furthermore, opponents said, social promotion perpetuates low expectations (Moore and Davenport 1988).

Those who favored social promotion said research indicates students who are retained are more likely to drop out; retention puts the burden on the student instead of the system; retention decisions are usually based on standardized test results; retention is inequitable as the majority of those retained are low-income and minority students; adequate remediation is usually not provided; and, finally, retention is expensive (Moore and Davenport).

Nevertheless, the pressure was on. Administrators were under attack to find quick fixes, and stricter standards for promotion seemed to be an answer—one that was especially popular with business leaders, taxpayers, and many parents.

"Supporters of stricter promotion have typically been successful in portraying their opponents as not believing that minority students can learn and as coddling students in the short-term to their long-term detriment," say Moore and Davenport.

In fact, the idea for stricter promotion may have come not from educators but from outsiders, suggests Roy P. Doyle, a professor of education at Arizona State University:

> In Arizona, for example, there is evidence that the trend toward increased rates of retention began not in the minds of professional educators but in the minds of the members of such lay groups as the state legislature, the state board of education and local school boards. (1989)

But legislators and lay people weren't the only ones who favored retention. One survey found that all teachers believe some children are better served by being held back, even though some of the teachers surveyed did not retain students themselves (Smith and Shepard 1988).

As school districts are besieged by criticism about students' lack of academic achievement and by shrinking school budgets as a result of taxpayer revolts and a staggering economy, the question of retention is again being debated. The major question is: Does it work? A survey of literature written in recent years suggests it does not.

Chapter 1 examines research data that look at the effectiveness of retention and find it lacking.

Chapter 1

Does Retention Work?

Each year thousands of children fail to make the grade in U.S. public schools and are held back for another year. Why? The practice is based on many assumptions:

- Students should acquire basic academic skills or minimal competencies to eventually become citizens who benefit the community, either through the money they earn or other services they perform. In an egalitarian culture such as ours, the belief is that all children should receive an equal education.
- Children can and should learn certain skills at certain age levels. Thus, school districts develop curricula that outline what those skill and age levels are.
- It is the child's responsibility to learn, rather than the teacher's responsibility to teach. In other words, if a child does not learn skills as he or she should, there is something wrong with the child, not the system.
- Another year in the same grade level will help students overcome whatever deficiencies they have.

Schools have been operating on these assumptions for decades, and even though critics suggest the learning process is more complex than that, changes are slow in coming.

Consider, for example, the assumption that a child will benefit from retention. Although research has shown this is usually not the case, many administrators, teachers, and even parents still believe in the practice. One study reported that 74 percent of school administrators, 65 percent of teachers, and 59 percent of parents supported retention in some cases (Dawson and Rafoth 1991).

Sometimes teachers who recommend retention argue that the child needs an extra year to grow or that he or she couldn't possibly survive in a higher grade level in the coming year. Other teachers base recommendations

for retention on the fact that the student hasn't done the work and so hasn't earned promotion (Dawson and Rafoth).

Policies Indicate Philosophy Varies

Most districts have retention policies, but the policies vary from district to district, sometimes even from school to school. A survey of fifty-nine school districts in South Carolina, for example, revealed that seven districts had a districtwide policy that pointed out the futility of retention; fifteen policies stated that students could be retained if the teacher, principal, and parent agreed the student would benefit; fourteen had policies that addressed specific grade levels; nine had specific guidelines for retention that included attendance, achievement, social maturity, age, and individual needs; and four discouraged retention unless it was absolutely necessary (Hall and Wallace 1986).

Some agencies, such as the National Association of School Psychologists, have put out sample policies that local districts can adopt either in toto or with changes to accommodate their district. One such policy comes from School Administrative Unit No. 56, Somesworth, New Hampshire. The policy says retention is never to be used as punishment; it is never to be used to supplant other educational services; retention decisions should be made by a team that considers relevant factors; and retention after the second grade should not occur except in the most extreme cases (Dawson and Rafoth).

The Big Cities Got Tough

In the early 1980s the Boston School District adopted a strict systemwide policy that called for K-8 standardized curriculum objectives in all major subjects; citywide testing in major subjects; test score achievements at grades 5, 8 and 12; and 85 percent attendance required each quarter.

Over the next four years attendance rose in Boston schools, but so did retention rates. In Boston's middle schools, for example, retentions rose from 13.5 percent in 1982-83 to 16.8 percent in 1984-85, the first year the new policy was in effect. The high school dropout rate also rose (Moore and Davenport).

New York City schools adopted a policy in 1981 that called for curriculum standards and testing at each grade level K-9 with "promotional gates" at grades 4 and 7. Students in fourth grade who were reading one year below level were to be retained, while students in seventh grade who were a year and a half below level in reading or math were to be retained.

In the first year the policy was enacted, some 25,000 students scored

below the promotional cutoffs. Those students who failed the test in the spring could attend summer school and be promoted if they took the test again and passed. Otherwise, they were placed in smaller remedial classes (Moore and Davenport).

Chicago schools likewise adopted strict promotion/retention policies during the 1980s. In the spring of 1980, for example, Chicago implemented a policy that said eighth graders would not move into high school if they were more than fifteen months below the national average on the Iowa Tests of Basic Skills in reading and math. Consequently, some 2,000 students were retained that year, but because the policy also said students could not be retained more than a year, these same students merely repeated the eighth grade, then went into high school the next year, many of them still behind. As a result, administrators eased up on that particular standard (Moore and Davenport).

The strict promotion policies in Boston were popular with business leaders, taxpayers, and parents, to the point that the school district won support for a large revenue increase, but teachers and administrators in all three cities —Boston, New York, and Chicago—soon found that strict retention policies were difficult to enforce. Holding back such large numbers of students resulted in crowded classrooms, many overage students in high school, and an increase in disruptive students. Consequently, districts were soon considering whether to revise their policies.

Is Retention a Myth?

Roy P. Doyle, an education professor at Arizona State University, says one reason the education community is reluctant to give up the practice of retention is the "power of myth."

Doyle calls the myth a nightmare for many children because it says that any normal child could be average if he or she tried. Consequently, children are evaluated as to whether they are ahead or behind.

Doyle says most evidence that supports retention is anecdotal. He compares it to the kind of thinking that proclaims smoking to be healthy and cites as an example the 90-year-old, cigar-smoking George Burns.

Source: Jo Anna Natale (1991)

Administrators discovered that one way to keep the popular policies and still ease the problems they caused was to allow substantial discretion within the schools in implementing the policies. This approach let schools maintain the posture that they were cracking down; at the same time it tolerated substantial deviations on the part of teachers and administrators who were opposed to the policies in the first place or who found them to cause too many problems in their schools (Moore and Davenport).

Whether a student is promoted or retained can depend upon many factors. Schools in New York City, Boston, Philadelphia and Chicago rely heavily upon academic testing. Many states and school districts require students to pass a minimum competency test. Often, however, the final decision is made by a small group that usually includes the teacher, parents, principal, and counselor or school psychologist.

Two questions arise when discussing the promotion or retention of a particular child: Does the student have a learning disability and therefore should receive some type of special education? and Is retention best for the child? It is at this point that individual attitudes of the team members come into play.

Extent of Retention

In school districts across the nation, the implementation of stricter promotion/retention policies has meant larger numbers of students retained.

As recently as November 1991, California's Superintendent of Public Instruction Bill Honig reported that about one of every seventeen kindergarten students in California was held back (Association of California School Administrators 1991).

In Massachusetts, 3.5 percent of students in grades prekindergarten through 12—28,233 students—were recommended for retention for the 1988-89 school year. Of that number, 11,227 were in grades PK-3 (4.3 percent of students enrolled in those grade levels); 1,081 (0.9 percent) in grades 4-5; 4,303 (2.5 percent) in grades 6-8; and 11,622 (4.5 percent) in grades 9-12 (Massachusetts Board of Education).

Those most likely to be retained were African-Americans (8.5 percent of the total number of African-American students enrolled) and Hispanics (8.3 percent). They were followed closely by Native Americans (6 percent of Native Americans enrolled), then Asians (3.9 percent), and finally white students (2.7 percent). More males were retained than females, and the greatest number of students retained lived in urban centers.

In the years since 1950, retention rates have fluctuated. In 1950, for example, the percentage of eight-year-olds in the United States who were enrolled below the mode was 6.6. That number fell to 4.0 percent in 1960, 3.4 percent in 1970, and 3.8 percent in 1976. But in 1978, when minimum competency testing programs became popular, the number of eight-year-olds who were behind increased to 17.2 percent. Oddly, the changes were not as great for seventeen-year-olds in the years 1950 and 1978. Some 22 percent of seventeen-year-olds were enrolled below the mode in 1950, compared to 22.3 percent in 1978. The percentages did fall, however, in the intervening years—14.9 percent in 1960, 11.0 percent in 1970, and 11.2 percent in 1976 (Medway).

National Figures Are Hard to Find

It is difficult to determine exactly how many students are retained each year, because no national statistics have been collected, but educational

writers and researchers have made some estimates.

After analyzing data from thirteen states and the District of Columbia in 1989, Lorrie A. Shepard and Mary Lee Smith estimated that 5 to 7 percent of public school children are held back annually throughout the nation. That translates into approximately two children in each classroom of thirty each year.

Shepard and Smith extended their figures by saying that a 6 percent annual rate year after year produces a cumulative rate of retention that is greater than 50 percent. They estimated that by ninth grade approximately half of all students in the country have flunked at least one grade or have dropped out (Shepard and Smith 1990).

The authors of a report put together for the Massachusetts Board of Education estimated the national retention rate of the K-12 public school population each year to be 2 to 8 percent (Massachusetts Board of Education). Yet another estimate is that approximately 2.3 million American students are held back each year (Dawson and Rafoth).

Retention rates vary widely, however. In California's elementary schools in 1985-86, the overall retention rate was 4.4 percent in early grades, but rates for individual districts ranged from zero to 50 percent (Schultz 1989).

Characteristics of Retained Students

As noted earlier, retention rates also vary depending upon where a student lives, gender, and race. Karweit, in a report for the Center for Research on Effective Schooling for Disadvantaged Students at Johns Hopkins University, provides this profile:

> The retained student is more likely to be male, to be younger than his classmates, to come from a lower socioeconomic family background, to be black or Hispanic, to be a behavior problem, and to be immature. Also, students are more likely to be retained in the South than in any other region. (1991)

Students are more likely to be retained at specific transitional points, such as kindergarten or first grade (school entry), or grade 6 (exit from elementary and entry into middle school), or grade 9 (high school entrance). (Karweit)

Especially in kindergarten, students are often kept back because they can't speak the language, but the biggest indicator of how successful a student will be is his or her comprehensive reading skills, says Hill (1989).

Other studies agree. Third-graders who are reading a year or more below grade level or who have been held back one or more times are defi-

nitely at risk. If these same children come from low socioeconomic backgrounds and attend schools where most students come from similar backgrounds, their chances of graduating from high school are extremely low (McPartland and Slavin 1990).

Many Youngsters Not Ready for School

Nearly 1.5 million American youngsters of kindergarten age aren't ready to start school.

So says the Carnegie Foundation, which surveyed 7,000 kindergarten teachers this summer. The teachers estimated that nearly 35 percent of the nation's children were not ready for school. The figure in Oregon was 32 percent.

The report calls for a multipronged strategy to be implemented in the 1990s: improving health care for children, expanding preschool programs, educating and training parents, making businesses more responsive to the needs of workers with families, and using television to aid in education.

Source: Associated Press (1991)

How Effective Is Retention?

In spite of all the emphasis on retention in the 1980s, an overwhelming majority of researchers are convinced that retention doesn't work. Not only does it not help students catch up, it usually proves to be counterproductive in the long run.

Concerning academic achievement, for example, Dawson and Rafoth analyzed sixty-three studies that investigated the effects of retention on academic achievement and personal adjustment and came to this conclusion: "Retained students do worse, academically, than comparable students who are promoted."

When academic achievement was broken down into different subject areas, the result was the same: Students who were promoted did better than students who were retained.

Karweit concurs. After looking at findings in various analyses, she stated, "There is not a positive effect for grade retention on academic achievement or on student personal adjustment."

Janet Rose, director of evaluation and research for the Charleston (South Carolina) County School District, studied more than 6,000 cases and found that only 20 to 35 percent of those students who were retained learned more material during the second year in the same grade than they had learned the first time around. She further reported that as many as 40 percent of the retained students actually learned less (Overman 1986).

Most Studies Overlook Long-term Effects

Many of the studies that survey academic achievement look at short-term effects only, but Schuyler looked at elementary student achievement in reading and mathematics over a four-year period. Schuyler found that the Austin, Texas, students gained in reading skills during the year they were retained, but then declined when they were promoted, although they were

still ahead of where they were before retention (Overman).

In mathematics, students' gains decreased while they were retained but increased when they were promoted. Although students may have shown some gains initially, they eventually found themselves back in the lower groups, Schuyler found.

Shepard and Smith, who edited a meta-analysis of research studies performed by Holmes in 1989, reported that fifty-four studies showed overall negative effects from retention, "even on measures of academic achievement." They further stated, "This means that when retained children went on to the next grade, they actually performed more poorly on average than if they had gone on without repeating."

To illustrate how much difference is involved, they presented a hypothetical example that has a group of retained students and a control group both at the 10th percentile on standardized achievement tests at the end of the first grade. The retained group repeats first grade while the control group is promoted to second grade. Two years later when the retained children complete second grade, the control group might test at the 30th percentile on average while the retained group might test on average at the 20th percentile (Shepard and Smith).

Does Retention Lead to Dropping Out?

Not only does retention apparently not improve academic achievement, research shows that many students who are retained often drop out of school when they get older. A study done in Chicago, for example, indicated that students who came into high school one year overage were approximately 50 percent more likely to drop out than students who were the correct chronological age for that level. This was true even when the overage students had substantially higher levels of reading achievement (Moore and Davenport).

Shepard and Smith reported that students who drop out are five times more likely to have repeated a grade than other students. Students who repeat two grades are almost certain to drop out.

The odds that a retained student will successfully complete high school are compared unfavorably with the likelihood of recovering from heart surgery. Frymier (1990) states that the heart attack victim has a better chance for recovery than the retained student has of graduating.

Retention Is Hard on Self-Esteem

One reason retention fails so many students may be the damage it does to their self-esteem. A study done by Yamamoto in 1980 reported that children rated the idea of repeating a grade as being worse than "wetting in

class" or being caught stealing. The only things considered worse by youngsters were losing a parent or going blind (Shepard and Smith).

Children also know that no matter what you call it, it is still "flunking," and they often view it as punishment for being bad. Even youngsters retained in kindergarten are more likely to have lower self-concepts and less positive attitudes toward school than control groups (Shepard and Smith).

Other studies show that older students who have been retained are perceived as being less popular. Retained students who think they are failures internalize that belief, and low achievement becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy (Massachusetts Board of Education).

But Some Say Retention Works

Not everyone agrees that retention is universally bad. As noted earlier, some administrators, parents, and especially teachers often think it can be beneficial. Shepard and Smith found that students who were low achievers but who were promoted anyway continued to be low achievers. In such cases teachers were apt to say, "If only we had retained him, his performance would have improved."

The attitude of teachers and parents toward retention can influence whether retention works. Teachers often automatically assume retention is beneficial and when they see a retained student do poorly, they may say, "He would have done even more poorly without the extra year," or "At least we tried" (Shepard and Smith).

Teachers sometimes recommend retention because they fear they will be criticized by the student's next teacher (Dawson and Rafoth). Other teachers are unable to see long-term negative effects of retention on students, and tend to overlook the "personal costs" to children and their parents (Schultz). Schuyler suggests that teachers and parents sometimes claim to see improvements in a student's performance because they need to justify their decision (Overman).

Retention is usually most successful with younger children. One study found that retention was most apt to work with a first-grader of normal or near-normal intelligence who has made some academic progress during the year, who is not performing at extremely low levels, who is emotionally well-adjusted, and who has appropriate social skills—in other words, a youngster who is only slightly behind (Overman).

Hall and Wallace, who studied policies regarding promotion and retention of students in South Carolina, said the best candidates for retention are those in first or second grade who have made some academic progress, have relatively good social skills, and were retained because of immaturity.

Other research has shown that students gain little academically if they are retained after the sixth grade and that first graders made more significant gains when retained than did second and third graders (Overman).

This suggests that maturation may do more to help young students succeed than retention does (Medway 1985). Exactly what role maturation plays in student achievement is uncertain, but some researchers have found that children with late birthdates who are held back or held out of school for a year may do better at first, but over time their early achievements may not hold up. Furthermore, holding a student back may not solve the problem of immaturity (Dawson and Rafoth).

How Accurate Are All These Studies?

Although hundreds of reports, reviews, and essays have been written about grade retention, they provide limited information. Research can be limited by its design, by failing to identify the basis of comparison, by inappropriately combining studies that use different practices, or by failing to look at the long-term effects of retention.

Study designs usually follow one of three patterns: Retained students are compared with promoted students; retained students are compared before and after retention; and equivalent students are assigned to promotion or retention and then compared. The first method is biased in favor of the promoted child, while the second method is biased in favor of the retained child. The third is the best method, but, because of ethical considerations, few studies have been done in this fashion since the 1930s (Karweit).

Despite the limitations, those who examine the studies say they show that grade retention does not have a positive effect either on academic achievement or on personal adjustment. Shepard and Smith, who have conducted their own studies and reviewed many others, conclude, "Strict promotion standards have been enforced for a decade and, as would have been predictable from the retention research findings on achievement, have not appreciably improved the performance of current graduates."

Then, There Is the Cost

Not only does retention seem to be unsuccessful in helping students to achieve better, but it is also expensive. In other words, school districts are spending a lot of money for a process that doesn't work.

In Massachusetts, for example, researchers estimate that if the 28,233 students recommended for retention in 1989-90 were held back, the total cost would be $120 million, based on an average per pupil cost of $4,259. They

note that promotion with instructional support has been found to substantially raise academic achievement. If districts would spend an average of $500 per student for such support, they could provide a more beneficial intervention at about one-ninth the cost of grade retention (Massachusetts Board of Education).

California's Superintendent of Public Instruction Bill Honig says the cost of retaining kindergarteners in that state comes to $84 million each year, and he asks districts to stop flunking students (Association of California School Administrators 1991).

The National Education Association estimates that for the 1989-90 school year the average cost per pupil in United States public schools was $4,890. That means a district that holds back 30 students would add $146,000 to its costs for the coming year (Dawson and Rafoth).

Shepard and Smith use an annual retention rate of 6 percent and a per-pupil cost of $4,051 to estimate that U.S. school districts spend nearly $10 billion a year to pay for an extra year of schooling for 2.4 million students.

They point out that this money would go a long way toward covering the cost of remedial programs, classroom aides, summer schools, or smaller classrooms—all of which can help students to achieve better results. A $6-an-hour full-time classroom aide, for example, would require the savings from only 1.6 retained students.

Another potential financial problem for school districts who retain students is the possibility of being sued for providing poor education.

Frederic J. Medway, associate professor of psychology at the University of South Carolina, writes, "If the student is not properly taught, nonpromotion is not only an injustice but a possible violation of student rights under the 14th Amendment" (1985).

So far, school districts have not been taken to task on that account. Courts usually stay away from such questions and don't interfere unless complaints are shown to be arbitrary, capricious, or discriminatory. Most such cases that have made it to court have concerned college students (Hall and Wallace).

Chapter 2

What Are Some Alternatives to Retention?

Because research literature strongly indicates that retention is both expensive to the district and harmful to a child, educators are seeking alternatives to retention—alternatives that help students succeed.

Clearly, the best alternative to retention is to educate children well enough that retention is unnecessary, and most everyone agrees that early intervention for at-risk children produces the best effects.

In the classroom, that means children should be identified at prekindergarten, kindergarten, or first-grade levels. However, prekindergarten usually doesn't deal with academic matters, and kindergartens vary as to whether they do, so first grade is a pivotal time for assessing youngsters' progress.

Reading Plays an Important Role

One of the first skills taught in school is reading, and some educators believe this skill to be the most important of all. Kenneth Hill, superintendent of a California elementary district, states, "In my opinion, comprehensive reading skills have the most direct relationship to success in school" (1989).

Consequently, some districts emphasize the mastery of reading and mathematics, usually through the use of tutors or other additional staff. More and more prevention programs are based on the theory that success in reading is predictive of later success in school and that intervention should take place in the first grade (McPartland and Slavin).

At-risk children should be identified by teachers, not tests, Hill says. But too often teachers have an "I can't do anything about it" attitude, and

they wait too long to provide help. Or they may assume the only option available is a pullout remediation program, and they are reluctant to send children into that.

New York City is one school district that has scrapped its strict retention policies of the 1980s and replaced them with a program that requires schools to identify at-risk students as early as possible and offer them extra help.

Early Intervention May Not Be Enough

While early intervention can make a difference, it is also important to look at how our assumptions about learning shape the way we view the problem. When school administrators and teachers dig deeply into what makes a successful educational system, they may find that changes are needed in their educational philosophies.

The first assumption that should be challenged is the idea that all children learn at the same rate. In an Arizona school district, for example, only 27.8 percent of fifth-graders were reading at fifth-grade level. When a researcher tried to locate all the students who were reading at fifth-grade level, he found they ranged from second to ninth grade (Natale).

The rigid grade-level structures that most schools use also are in need of reexamination. They often force the student to fit into the system, instead of allowing the system to accommodate the child (Natale).

Districts should also review conventional methods of education, including such things as tracking, traditional grade-level configurations, and homogeneous grouping (Hill).

Another concept to be challenged is the idea that repetitive drills are effective ways of teaching. Learning that involves the student in solving meaningful problems is more effective, and struggling students "need a more inspired and engaging curriculum," say Shepard and Smith.

Stop the Assembly Line

Educating our youngsters in the United States is "assembly-line education," says columnist William Raspberry.

He asks what would happen if auto manufacturers allowed only so much time to develop the chassis, engine, and other parts. At the end of the line, the parts would be inspected and those that didn't meet the standards would be thrown out.

"The company might have to dump a lot of unmarketable automobiles, but the assembly line would keep rolling along," Raspberry says.

Yet that is what U.S. schools are doing, with each student expected to achieve so much in a set time. Raspberry quotes from an article written by Walter Blaedel and N.R. Gamsky in the December 1965 issue of *The Clearing House*, an education journal. In the article, the authors call for students to have a variable amount of time to achieve.

Raspberry calls the notion perfectly reasonable, then concludes, "but 26 years after they made it seem so clear, we still don't know how to get from here to there."

Source: William Raspberry (1991)

The practice of testing children at early ages is another question that needs to be examined, since some educators doubt whether such tests are accurate predictors. Some states, such as North Carolina, have decided to postpone the use of standardized testing until an age when children can better cope with test-taking or to limit tests of very young children to sample groups, which not only minimizes the trauma of the testing experience, but also cuts down on the amount of money spent on tests (Schultz).

Better accountability measures are suggested instead of relying on tests. Educators should develop more holistic means of assessing reading, writing, and math skills, say Dawson and Rafoth.

If such time-honored concepts about education are to be challenged, however, they must be thoroughly studied and discussed, and attitudes must change—something that may not be easy to accomplish. For example, Doyle conducted a study in a small Arizona town about how people's attitudes might change if they had more information. He prepared a paper that reported findings about the failures of retention and presented it to a group of teachers, a separate group of parent leaders, the Rotary Club, and an education class he was teaching. He measured attitudes of all these people both before and after the presentation, and he found a substantial shift of opinion in some cases.

He reports that community leaders were most in favor of retention before the presentation, whereas local teachers were the least in favor of it. After the presentation, several community leaders had changed their attitudes toward some aspects of retention, favoring it less or at least being uncertain about it whereas they had been certain before.

But Doyle also found that while beliefs changed about the effects of retention on children, abstract beliefs about the integrity of diplomas and the idea of promotion as a reward continued to be strong. "This suggests that it may be easier to convince people that retention in grade is harmful to children than it is to persuade them to stop doing it," he says.

Doyle further points to the fact that although respondents may have rejected the value of retention, they continued to believe that social promotion contributes to low achievement. "This apparent contradiction attests to the persistence of beliefs that have gained acceptance in subtle ways and seem not to require evidence or logic to sustain them," Doyle says.

Some Alternatives to Retention

In spite of early intervention and other preventive measures, teachers sometimes still find that certain students should be retained. The usual method has been to have the student repeat the grade, either with the same teacher or a different one.

Research indicates, however, that a number of other options may be more beneficial to the student than merely repeating the grade. For example, a student can be:

- Promoted and given remedial instruction on skills he or she has not mastered.
- Placed in a transitional class with other students who are failing or at risk of failing.
- Retained and given remedial instruction, although some educators do not advocate this.
- Placed in summer remediation classes.
- Placed in a multigrade or multiage classroom.
- Promoted conditionally, with the student, parent, counselor, and administrator signing a two-way agreement that outlines conditions for promotion the following year.
- Retained with the proviso that the student will be promoted during the year if the appropriate skills are attained.
- Placed in a class that emphasizes one-on-one tutoring, peer tutoring, or computer-aided instruction.
- Partially promoted to a "half-step" grade, where only part of the curriculum is repeated.
- Placed in special education classes, but this often limits the youngster's future opportunities.
- Placed in an alternative program outside the school. Some research, however, has found that students separated from the conventional school turn out to be even more at risk (Hill).

Not all the solutions listed above are recommended by educators, however. Transition classes and "half-step" grades, for example, may be no better for a child's self-esteem than retention.

Transition classes add an extra year between kindergarten and first grade. The idea was that such a class would soften the jolt of entering first grade for students who were immature. But educators are backing away from such classes because the end result means the child is still behind his age group when promoted, and it adds an extra year to his schooling. As Natale says, "Transition can be retention in another guise."

A half-grade concept that seems to be successful was instituted at Mars Elementary School in Berrien Springs, Michigan. Principal Gerald Jennings and teachers Shirley Burge and Diane Sitek say the Mars School Developmental Curriculum Ladder was started to counteract the fact that many promoted children continued to fail. The Mars plan adds a "primary" class before kindergarten for children who are age 5 by December 1. Such children, the Mars educators say, are behind developmentally and not ready

for kindergarten.

Between kindergarten and first grade is "Primary I," a class for children who have completed kindergarten but are not developmentally ready for first grade. "Primary II" is a half-step class between first and second grades. That class is for children who have completed first grade but are not developmentally ready for second grade.

The rationale is that it is better for a youngster to take four years to go through the Mars program in a manner that reflects success than to push that same youngster through in three years only to see him or her continue to fail. The expectation is that a student would not spend more than one year in a half-step class, but the faculty estimated when the program began that as many as 50 percent of the students may take four years to complete the kindergarten-through-second-grade curriculum.

After three years the plan seemed to be working for students, teachers, and parents. At the end of the third year, the school had three Primary rooms, one Primary I room, and one Primary II room, each class with a lower student-teacher ratio than regular classrooms. The authors further state the children involved in the half-step classes have developed a "more positive self-concept" (Jennings, Burge, and Sitek 1987).

More Examples of Specific Programs

Educators searching for alternatives to retention have developed a variety of programs. One such program is Success for All, developed by Robert Slavin, a researcher at Johns Hopkins' Center for Research on Elementary and Middle Schools. The program is designed for students in prekindergarten through grade 3, and the goal is to provide resources so that every student reaches third grade on time. The program's ingredients include one-on-one tutors, using Chapter I funds, a cross-grade reading program, assessments of each student every eight weeks, a Family Support Team, and a school facilitator (Massachusetts Board of Education).

One program that focuses on reading is the Reading Recovery Program, developed first in New Zealand but now found in the United States. The program identifies at-risk students in first grade and gives them intensive instruction. Ohio State University studies found that 90 percent of the students who took part in the program matched the class average within fifteen to twenty weeks and didn't fall behind again (Dawson and Rafoth).

Another program helpful to the elementary student was developed by the West Chester Area School District in West Chester, Pennsylvania. In this plan, two teams are formed that include reading remediation specialists, special education teachers, aides, student teachers, and all K-2 teachers. The team approach allows a ratio of 10 to 1 or less for two or three hours each

school day. An assessment in 1986 showed that all entering second graders were at grade level, and test scores were up (Massachusetts Board of Education).

In Spotswood Elementary School in Harrisonburg, Virginia, a team approach was also developed for students who had been retained twice already, were still in elementary school, and were still having social and learning difficulties.

The team includes one or more classroom teachers, an administrator, a special education instructor, support personnel, a guidance counselor, and one or more teacher assistants. The team then looks at the at-risk student and puts together a plan for the child's success that takes both social and academic problems into account.

In one case a youngster was placed in a special reading group, and in math he received the help of a resource teacher who taught him at his own pace. This student spent one semester in the second grade, was moved into third grade the following semester, and then spent a full year in fourth grade. During this period, both his self-esteem and his academic achievement improved (Hamilton and Burkholder 1991).

Accelerated Schools Project Speeds Up Learning

One program that has received considerable attention is the Accelerated Schools Project, which focuses on speeding up the instructional pace for at-risk students instead of "dumbing down" the curriculum—much the same kind of instruction as gifted students receive. Started some five years ago by Henry M. Levin, a professor of education at Stanford University, the program calls for a complete makeover of the school.

When a school decides to implement the program, the staff undergoes a one-week training session with a team from Stanford. The staff is encouraged to create a vision of what it would like the school to be and select priority areas that need special attention. The implementation plan drawn up by staff should include curriculum, instruction, and school organization, and should involve the entire school community in the decision-making process.

Under the Accelerated Schools Project, teachers raise expectations for students and often use more active, hands-on learning in place of lectures and worksheets. For example, students may be asked to analyze commercials on "The Cosby Show" instead of doing worksheets for homework.

So far, the program has been greeted with enthusiasm and is being used in approximately 140 schools this year, compared to 54 schools last year (Rothman 1991).

The Daniel Webster Elementary School in San Francisco, the first school to become involved in the project, saw its standardized test scores

post the largest increase in the city last year. However, other educators say it is still too early to determine if the program is working.

One major problem with the project is that it is expensive to implement. Although some educators claim the program doesn't add greatly to the school's cost, it demands that teachers spend considerable time outside the classroom.

Another problem is that sometimes a program developed by a school may clash with local or state regulations. One example occurred in Texas, where the school district wanted to distribute old textbooks to parents, who would then help their children. But a state law required such textbooks to be burned, not given away, so the school district "loaned" the books to parents and said they had been stolen. The law has since been repealed (Rothman).

Students Advance at Their Own Pace

"Continuous progress" models, in which students move at their own pace through a sequence of instructional objectives, are gaining in popularity. Students are often taught in small groups composed of youngsters with similar skill levels, no matter what grade they are in. These continuous progress programs can vary considerably. Examples are DISTAR, which is highly structured; the Utah System Approach to Individualized Learning (U-SAIL); and the Continuous Progress Reading Program: Personalized Educational Growth and Selective Utilization of Staff—Personalized Approach to Continuous Education (PEGASUS-PACE). The latter two programs are more flexible in groupings and skill hierarchies (McPartland and Slavin).

Perhaps the best thing that can be done for an at-risk child is to develop an individual plan similar to the Individualized Educational Plans (IEPs) used with special education students. Most educators agree that at-risk children need more individualized attention, and that often means smaller classrooms or more staff. Providing individualized attention is usually more expensive than a traditional classroom arrangement. School districts need to compare the cost of developing IEPs or other alternative programs with the short- and long-term cost of retaining students to determine whether such programs are cost-effective.

Chapter 3

Retention Practices—and Alternatives—in Selected Oregon School Districts

Just as they do on the national scene, retention practices vary considerably in Oregon school districts. The Oregon Department of Education has no administrative rules pertaining to retention policies, so school districts are free to formulate their own policies. The Oregon School Boards Association has sample policies, however, and works with approximately 95 percent of the school districts in the state to help them develop a policy to fit their individual needs, says Gail Perkins of OSBA.

Statewide figures on the number of retentions are not available. Nor do educational service districts have much information about retention practices within their boundaries. To get that kind of information, one must contact the individual school districts. Even then, the information is sometimes difficult to track down, depending upon whether the district keeps track of how many students are held back and what happens to them.

Seven Oregon school districts were contacted—Ashland, Creswell, Eugene, Klamath County, Portland, Salem/Keizer, and Umatilla—to determine their policies and practices concerning promotion and retention. Most of those interviewed say they focus more on prevention than on retention; consequently, the number of retained students is not considerable and not many alternative programs have been started. The smaller districts, such as Creswell and Umatilla, do not have sufficient resources to add much in the way of extensive alternative programs.

Ashland

Located approximately fifteen miles north of the Oregon-California border and nestled against the Siskiyou Mountains, Ashland is a town of about 16,000 people. Among the city's largest employers are Southern Oregon State College and the Oregon Shakespeare Festival. At one time Ashland had many sawmills, but they have mostly disappeared as the town's economic base has shifted from timber to education and tourism.

Retention

The Ashland school district has 3,300 students in five elementary schools, a middle school, and a high school. Last year twenty students were retained districtwide, all of them in elementary schools and most of them in the first grade.

Karen Dalrymple, director of education for the district, says Ashland's policy is to retain students if they fall significantly below grade level and if retention would benefit the student. Parents are consulted and every educational consideration examined before the decision is made. The principal makes the final decision.

When students are retained, they usually stay with the same teacher for the following year. Dalrymple says only a few teachers retain students in Ashland, and she suggests one reason for the practice is that teachers are concerned about what might happen to a child if he or she is sent to the second grade as a nonreader.

Alternatives

Dalrymple says alternatives to retention in the Ashland District are to put the student into a multiage group, to transfer the student to another school, or to work with the student in small groups or one-on-one.

She suggests another alternative is to work with children at whatever levels they are, though this would require additional money for staff development.

Creswell

The Creswell School District, located twelve miles south of Eugene along Interstate 5, has 1,070 students in an elementary school, a middle school, and a high school. The average cost per pupil per year is $5,200 in this primarily rural/agricultural district. The largest industries in town are lumber mills and Fircrest Farms, a poultry processing plant.

Retention

Duane Lyons, Creswell's superintendent, says fewer than 1 percent of students are retained each year on average. Last year, four students were retained in kindergarten-first grade, one student at the fifth-grade level, one at the seventh-grade level, and one at eighth-grade. Students are not retained in high school per se; rather, they are classified by grade according to how many credits they have earned.

The promotion-retention policy is based on objective data, and retention is considered only if it appears to be in a student's best interest. A timeline is drawn up early in the year to allow parents and teachers to confer about students who are at risk, so that if a student is retained, it is not a surprise at the end of the school year.

Lyons says parents make the final decision about whether their elementary child should be retained, but if the student is older, the staff makes the decision. Neither of those practices is included in the written policies, Lyons says. Another consideration that is not mentioned in the policy—but is often a major factor—is the student's maturity.

Goals are identified for retained students, but usually the student repeats the same grade, either with the same teacher or another teacher. The retained student may be placed in a different reading group.

Alternatives

Lyons says the district tries to accommodate retained students as much as possible. Sometimes this can be done through scheduling. For example, rearranging schedules for older students can be helpful. Another source of help, especially for uppergrade youngsters with behaviorial problems, is counseling.

Lyons says his staff has a "tremendous amount of frustration" with the district's retention practices overall. District personnel would like to see an alternative program for middle school and high school students, and the development of IEPs for at-risk students.

Eugene

Eugene, a city of approximately 117,000 and the county seat of Lane County, is located approximately 100 miles south of Portland. It is home to the University of Oregon, and the economy is based on education, timber, secondary wood products, tourism, recreation, agriculture, and food processing. The Eugene School District has slightly more than 18,300 students, with an average yearly cost per pupil of $5,000.

Retention

Martha Harris, director of curriculum and instruction, says the district's retention policy is written more as a promotion policy in that students are expected to be promoted unless there is a "need to examine some departure from annual promotion." The decision is made by the parent, teacher, and principal, with the principal having the final decision. Parents can appeal the decision with the district's director of elementary education.

Harris did not have exact figures on how many students are retained each year, but most of them are in the elementary grades, with perhaps a few in the middle schools. High school ranking is based on the number of credits a student has earned.

If students are retained, they may have the same teacher again or a different teacher—a matter that is worked out in an agreement with the parents. Because the district has open enrollment, a student can attend a different school to avoid the stigma of being retained.

Alternatives

Harris says the Eugene district is constantly regrouping its students to find the best place for them. Alternatives for students at risk (but not necessarily alternatives to retention) include special education classes with IEPs, a special summer program, or programs involving Chapter I funds.

Harris says the district's philosophy is to try to get people to realize that retention is only one solution—usually the last one. The emphasis is to advance the student with his or her same-age cohorts.

Klamath County

Klamath County Schools cover an area that stretches south to the Oregon-California border, west to the Cascades, east to the Gearhart Mountains, and north almost to La Pine. Included in the district are large portions of Forest Service land, Crater Lake, and Klamath Lake. Most of the population lives in and around Klamath Falls, which has a population of 17,700 and is the home of Oregon Institute of Technology. The county's economy relies upon the timber industry, agriculture, tourism, and recreation.

Retention

The district has approximately 6,700 students. Richard Darst, director of curriculum and secondary programs, estimates between 10 and 15 students are retained each year in grades K-8 (which enroll approximately 5,400 students).

The retention policy is based on academic achievement, but retention is "basically undesirable." Instead, teachers try to identify at-risk youngsters early, then notify the parents.

Tests and conferences with parents take place during the school year, and the decision to retain involves the principal, parents, teacher, and child development specialist. Students who are retained usually repeat the grade but in a different class and with different expectations.

Alternatives

The Klamath County district has core teams that find students at risk, then help get them up to speed, Darst says.

The goal is to identify youngsters with difficulties as early as possible—usually in kindergarten or first grade. Once children are identified, the problems can be addressed in the classroom, possibly assisted by Chapter I funds.

The district also has some nongraded programs in both primary and intermediate grades.

Darst says his district has a large turnover of students, and many new students are more than five times as likely to be at risk than permanent students. Some schools find that migrants comprise as much as 25 percent to 33 percent of their enrollment. Many migrant children are staying longer, however, giving them more time to be assimililated into programs that can help them.

Portland

Portland, a city of approximately 440,000, is located at the confluence of the Willamette and Columbia rivers in the northern part of the state and is by far the largest metropolitan area in Oregon. The Portland School District enrolls approximately 55,000 students.

Retention

Rebecca Severeide, the district's early childhood specialist, says that fewer than three-tenths of 1 percent are retained each year, mostly in the prekindergarten through second-grade classes. That translates to 36-40 students out of the approximately 12,000 students in the 4-8 age grouping.

Severeide says the retention policy is old and vague, but retention is not encouraged. Instead, teachers are urged to place children in the least restrictive situation for them.

The district holds seminars for teachers each year, encouraging them

to look at more flexible alternatives for students at risk. As a result, very few students are retained, and the reasons for their retention vary widely. The main factors that determine whether a student is to be retained appear to be immature behavior and lack of performance. If students are retained, they "almost always" repeat the grade.

Alternatives

Severeide says the district is taking a systemwide approach in an effort to make expectations and class schedules more flexible and to make programs more meaning-based. Another goal of the district is to provide students with a choice of activities through learning centers within the classroom. Teachers find that when youngsters are allowed to make choices about their learning, their immature behavior often disappears.

Another innovation is a holistic language program in which students combine reading and writing skills along with group experience. For example, students will read aloud, with the group stopping occasionally to study speech patterns and rhythms. Then each student is asked to write a story and share his or her writing with other students, who then discuss it. Severeide says teachers have found this approach also helps students to learn a second language more easily.

The Portland schools use flexible schedules with a balance between teacher-directed and student-directed activities, along with small group work —a practice that allows youngsters to be more active. One way a teacher can work with small groups is to send half the class to music along with half of another class, allowing the teacher time to work uninterrupted with a smaller group.

Severeide says teachers sometimes find it difficult to make the transition to more flexible scheduling, and so staff development is offered. One well-trained teacher can handle a flexible classroom, Severeide says, although a classroom with a 25:1 ratio is much too large, so smaller classrooms are needed as well as teacher training.

Severeide does not advocate transition classrooms, which have been touted as an alternative to retention. Calling transition classrooms a "well-meaning response," Severeide thinks they are ineffective. Although some parents and teachers seem to like the concept, Severeide believes other programs would be more beneficial in the long run.

Salem-Keizer

The Salem/Keizer School District is located in Marion County some

45 miles south of Portland. Salem, which has a population of 106,000, is the state's capitol, and the main industries are government and agriculture. The district has approximately 30,000 students.

Retention

Wink Miller, director of the McKay Area of the district and responsible for districtwide elementary programs, says the district's retention policy is general, not specific. Retentions occur primarily in kindergarten and primary grades; students usually are not retained beyond the third or fourth grades. The longer a student has been in school, the less likely he or she will be retained.

The decision to retain a student is usually made by the teacher, parents, and a special committee that includes the principal. Questions discussed during the decision-making process include whether the child has a learning disability, the child's age, and developmental patterns of the family. For example, Miller says, parents might be asked how fast they matured as children.

When a child is retained, teachers usually build an individualized program or develop other special responses. The student sometimes stays with the same teacher to work on areas that need improvement, or the student may work with other teachers.

Alternatives

Miller says very few students are retained because of extensive teacher-parent conferences in which parents receive early notification of problems. Whether a student is retained or promoted isn't a "life and death" situation, he adds. A student may be retained one year, then double promoted the next year. Decisions are based on the child and his or her performance.

Umatilla

The Umatilla School District is located in northeastern Oregon, along the Columbia River and near the Umatilla Ordnance Depot. The main industries of Umatilla County are agriculture, food processing, wood products, tourism, manufacturing, and recreation. The town of Umatilla—an Indian word that means "water rippling over sand"—has 3,000 residents.

Retention

The district has approximately 1,000 students and educates them at an

average cost of $4,300 per pupil per year. Last year only one student was retained, and that was in middle school.

John Thomas, high school principal, says the policy for retention in the elementary and middle schools is based more on immaturity than academics, and the decision is made in conjunction with parents. High school students advance according to how many credits they have. If students are retained, they repeat the grade but with a different teacher, and the focus is on what the child has not learned.

Thomas says the district experiences a 50 percent turnover of students in a year because of the large number of migrant workers. Elementary school students are generally placed by age and tested. To accommodate the wide range of student abilities, teachers offer three levels of lessons in the same classroom.

Alternatives

Thomas says his district offers a six-month English learning skills program and a migrant program for the Spanish-American students, who make up 21 percent of the total student population in the district.

For those who drop out—some 9.3 percent a year—students can attend an adult GED program. Summer schools are offered through the education service district and Blue Mountain Community College, but classes are for older students. The district has received a grant for tutorials to be implemented next year.

Is the Retention Fad Fading?

Perhaps because the state's public schools have had so many budget problems in recent years, many school boards, teachers, and administrators have decided to forego the retention fad of the 1980s and focus instead of helping children to succeed so that retention can be avoided.

Nevertheless, retention is still regarded favorably in many circles. If it is to be eliminated, Oregon's school districts have more work to do. Chapter 4 surveys some of the policy implications that school boards and educators can examine as they discuss changes in promotion and retention practices.

Chapter 4

Retention Practices Can Be Changed

When the subject of retention is mentioned, one sometimes gets the impression that it is like a shameful family secret: best not to talk about it. Perhaps that's because retention means either the student or the system has failed—and the system doesn't like to admit failure.

Too often, the blame is put on the student: he or she didn't meet the teacher's (or the district's) expectations. But the larger question wasn't asked: Were those expectations too great?

School systems throughout the United States are beginning to question the practice of retention and to discuss changes, but if changes are to be implemented, the implications for policy and administration loom large. This chapter examines some of those implications.

Policy Implications

As mentioned in chapter 2, the educational system in the United States operates on several assumptions, such as a child should learn certain skills at certain age levels, and it is his or her responsibility to do so. Another assumption is that students who do not perform as well as expected will do better if they are held back a year—given a second chance, as it were.

Despite the fact that U.S. public schools have operated on these assumptions for decades, at least one of them appears to be false. When the practice of retention is challenged, researchers overwhelmingly say it is unsuccessful.

Curriculum Reform

A major policy indication for a school district that wants to attack this

problem is to rethink the curriculum and its delivery, basing it on models that more appropriately reflect children's actual learning patterns. For example, Karen Dalrymple, Ashland's director of education, encourages the educational community to get rid of the intellectual mindset that demands that all first graders should be able to read.

Research shows that children learn at different speeds, and much of that depends upon the home from which they have come. A student whose parents have not read to him or her perhaps because they cannot read themselves will come into school much less prepared than the child who was read to every night.

Children who come from stressful home situations or who are tired and hungry also will not learn as quickly as children who are happy and healthy. All this is known to educators, and local districts, with the help of state and federal agencies, have instituted many programs that look at the student's needs beyond school, such as hot lunch programs and home visits.

But that still doesn't address the problem of expecting all children to meet the same qualifications at the same time. Karen Hemmingsen, policy specialist for the Oregon School Boards Association, believes that teaching styles may be more important than the curriculum itself. She suggests instructional grouping and flexibility, allowing children to be placed where they will benefit the most.

One possibility that is gaining interest is the multiage classroom, in which grade levels are combined. For example, London School, a small elementary school in Cottage Grove's South Lane School District, instituted a nongraded program in September 1991 that splits children into two teams —one that includes children from kindergarten to second grade, and the other composed of third- through fifth-graders. Children are assigned to a homeroom teacher who will stay with them for all three years the student is in the team. This will allow the teacher to become thoroughly acquainted with the child's learning style and to develop helpful programs (Ellingboe 1991).

(Multiage classrooms will be the topic of the March OSSC Bulletin.)

Some Teachers Rely on Intuition

Intuition seems to play a big role in the decision of whether a child should be retained; the teacher feels the child isn't ready or can't make it at a higher level without additional help. Intuition also tells some teachers and parents that a second year will help the child, and when the child shows some improvement, the teacher feels justified in retaining him or her.

In fact, the teacher's attitude toward retention and promotion apparently plays a big part in what happens to a student. One Oregon district, for

example, reports that nearly all the retentions in the district consistently occur in the same classrooms.

Maturity and Self-Esteem

Another factor to be considered in child development is maturity. For example, one study found that 80 percent of first graders who were retained made satisfactory achievements, whereas fewer than half of second and third graders who were retained achieved at a satisfactory level (Overman).

This suggests that maturity may play a big role in helping a child to achieve, especially at the first-grade age level, or it may mean that a younger child is not as aware of the stigma of "flunking" as an older child and so accepts the retention and tries to perform better.

This brings up the matter of the child's self-esteem. Yamamoto's study in which children said the only things worse than retention were the thoughts of losing a parent or going blind surely indicates the child is profoundly affected. The fact that so many retained students later drop out is another indication that retention might be harmful (or at least not helpful) to their self-perception. In other words, the child equates retention with failure, and those retained may see themselves as failures for the rest of their schooling, perhaps the rest of their lives.

Clearer Policies

Another place where change may be necessary is the retention policy itself. Many districts have policies that are general and vague, leaving considerable room for interpretation, which can be good or bad. The other extreme is the kind of policy, such as those found in New York City and Boston schools, that lists such stringent qualifications for promotion that thousands of students cannot meet them. Perhaps a better policy is a sample offered by the Oregon School Boards Association (see Appendix) that assumes a child will be promoted except "when, in the judgment of the professional staff, such exceptions (to promotion) are in the best educational interest of the students involved."

A promotion policy recommended in Massachusetts calls for all or most low-achieving students to be promoted and for staff to develop an individual plan for each, or to promote low-achieving students conditionally and have the student, parent, counselor, and administrator sign an agreement.

Students would be retained only as a last resort and then only if they were in the early elementary grades, had good social skills and a strong self-concept, had a positive relationship with the teacher, and had parents who understood the implications of retention and approved of it. Retained stu-

dents would receive a substantionally different curriculum and would be assigned to a different teacher (Massachusetts Board of Education).

Whether the policy is general or specific depends upon the school board's philosophy, Hemmingsen says. Some boards want a policy that outlines specific objectives, whereas other boards want procedures that are vague enough to exercise "compassion and judgment" in assessing children.

Hemmingsen prefers the latter type—a policy that says children should be educated with their peers, and the instructional program should be tailored to their needs.

Implications for Administrators and Teachers

It's not enough to change policies; they must be implemented, too, and that falls directly upon the administrators and teachers.

Where to start? Perhaps by tracking students who have been retained. Some districts apparently do not keep track of their retained students: They do not examine what led to the retention, what kind of instruction the retained student receives, whether the retained student does better the following year, or what happens to the retained student in later years.

A Quiz on Retention Practices

Questions a district should consider about its retention practices:

- Are promotion standards based on testing or teacher recommendations?
- Does the promotion/retention policy define clear guidelines?
- In which subjects are students being retained?
- Is one category of students being retained more than others?
- Do retained students ever catch up to their age-level peers?
- Do retained students repeat the grade with the same teacher or another teacher?
- Do low-achieving students receive additional instructional support?
- Does the school or district have other resources to help low-achievers?
- Is there sufficient staff development to expose teachers to diverse teaching approaches?

Source: Massachusetts Board of Education (1990)

Often, such tracking is impossible. Some students move in and out of schools frequently, and just placing them correctly in the classroom is a major task, much less finding out what happens to them two or three years down the road.

It soon becomes obvious that a child's education depends on many more factors than what happens in the classroom. Students who move frequently or who are kept out of school for whatever reason may be more at risk than students whose parents live in the same community over a period of time. Rebecca Severeide of the Portland schools calls for better social policy that meshes with school policy for best results.

Even so, some districts interviewed did not appear to have much grasp about what happens in their districts concerning retention.

This suggests that the first thing a district could do is to track each student

who is retained, not just for the following year but for the student's entire educational career. Then the district should carefully analyze this material and share it with staff and parents.

Staff Training Is Needed

Another challenge is to move staff away from preconceived ideas. This may not be easy, especially for teachers who have been in the classroom for years. Some teachers are uncomfortable in dealing with children on several levels—letting them choose their own activities or working with small groups, for example. Teachers will have to be shown how they can efficiently work with a variety of skill levels within the classroom—certainly a daunting task.

Hemmingsen believes that such training should be flexible enough so that teachers are not forced to change until they are ready. Otherwise, disgruntled teachers may attempt to sabotage new methods, and the process becomes counterproductive.

Other specific recommendations for classroom changes follow:

- Set semester goals that call for a specific number of papers written and books read.
- Use more individual seat work while building incentives for student group interaction. Cooperative learning, project-based learning, and peer tutoring are also suggested.
- Use a thematic, rather than sequential, curriculum that reflects students' cultural and socioeconomic backgrounds.
- Develop cross-disciplinary teacher teams that work with students for more than one year.
- Award credits by semester in secondary schools so that students have only one semester to make up instead of a whole year.
- Assign homework that is meaningful.
- Emphasize the importance of reasoning, problem solving, analyzing, and defending points of view.

(Massachusetts Board of Education)

For all these recommendations to work, the school district must have a clear sense of mission that is based on the concept that each child can learn and be successful. The entire community must be involved in determining what the exact mission is. Parents and community leaders—as well as politicians—must understand that current practices of retention are not only counterproductive, they are downright harmful, both for individual students and for society as a whole.

Some of these reforms are already being attempted in the Oregon Educational Act for the 21st Century, enacted by the Oregon Legislature in

1991 as HB 3565.

The act declares that a "restructured education system is necessary to achieve the state's goal of having the best educated citizens in the nation by the year 2000 and a work force equal to any in the world by the year 2010" (Oregon Department of Education 1991).

The act sets out its expectations in detail, one of which is:

> The plan will include strategies for prevention of failure and preventative and remedial services, early intervention for students needing special assistance, a funding formula to reduce class size, integration of health and social services, and parent involvement in the schools.

Changes May Cost Money, But Can We Afford Not To?

All of this will cost money, and money is a touchy subject for school districts across the nation. A lack of funds may drag at the lofty ambitions of Oregon's HB 3565.

But the alternative is just as costly, perhaps even more so. If a district retains ten students a year at an annual average cost of $5,000 per pupil, the total cost for that extra year of schooling is $50,000—a sum that could be better used hiring an additional teacher or other staff who could provide more individualized help.

The additional cost of losing students who drop out is intangible, but we all know that the cost to society of welfare, crime, and unemployment is enormous, and if those same ten children can be better helped through means other than retention, they have a much better chance of becoming successful and productive citizens instead of a burden on the system.

Appendix

Policies on Promotion and Retention

Reprinted below are sample policies concerning promotion and retention that are available from the Oregon School Boards Association and the National Association of School Psychologists.

Oregon School Boards Association

The Oregon School Boards Association has four sample policies for promotion and retention of students.

Version 1

The Board is dedicated to total and continuous development of each student enrolled. The professional staff is expected to place students at the grade level best suited to them academically, socially, and emotionally.

Students will normally progress annually from grade to grade. Exceptions may be made when, in the judgment of the professional staff, such exceptions are in the best educational interest of the students involved. Exceptions will always be made after prior notification and explanation to the student's parents, but the final decision will rest with school authorities.

Version 2

Students who cannot demonstrate proficiency in each subject area, or who are not making adequate progress toward demonstrating proficiency at their grade levels, will be considered for retention. Teachers must notify the principal of these students, make a recommendation to the principal concern-

ing their promotion/retention, and hold a conference with parents. Parental decisions will be final, but when the parents' decision is not in agreement with the school's recommendation, parents must sign a "release from responsibility" form to be placed in the student's file.

Version 3

Students shall be placed at the grade level to which they are best adjusted academically, socially, physically, and emotionally. If retention is suggested, the following steps must be taken.

1. *By the end of the first quarter*—indications to parents of inadequate progress by the student.
2. *By the end of the first quarter*—teachers must read Light's Retention Scale and Parent Guide to Light's Retention Scale.
3. *By the end of the second quarter*—notify parents of possibility of retention if the situation does not change (Give specific suggestions for improvement to the student and/or parents. Review grade level standards/goal with parents.).
4. *By the end of the second quarter*—teachers will submit a list of possible retention candidates to the [superintendent/principal].
5. *Early in mid-March*—administration of Light's Retention Scale by classroom teacher (A 5 on the retention scale does not preclude retention, but should be discussed with the committee. [Give parents a copy of Parent Guide to Retention.]).
6. *Early in mid-March*—retention committee comprised of the [superintendent/principal, assistant principal, counselor, Chapter 1 director, physical education specialist, and a classroom teacher from that department (primary, intermediate, upper)] will meet to consider Light's Retention Scale results, student work samples, test scores, and behavior programs; a decision in promotion/retention will be made at this time by the committee.
7. *By the end of the third quarter*—teacher, and committee member(s) if requested, will confer with parents (and student, if appropriate) on results of the retention committee decision.
8. If a student is being considered for promotion at any time during the school year in grades 5 through 8 and has been previously retained, then the teacher involved with the original retention will be included in the discussion of this student (if possible).
9. Special promotions will be made by the committee as needed.
10. If a student is being considered for a special promotion at any grade level, then the committee will meet to make a decision.

Midterm reports are to be sent to the parents of all students experiencing academic difficulties. These will be prepared during the fourth week and

sent during the fifth week of every quarter.

Conferences, at the option of the teacher, parent or student, will be held whenever requested.

Records of the committee findings will be kept in the student's behavioral file, and records of parental action will be kept in the cumulative file.

Parents/guardians may request retention if they believe it to be in the best interest of their child. The school will act, starting on step 5 of the policy, to determine appropriate action.

Any decision concerning promotion and retention not satisfactory to all concerned may be appealed to the Board under the terms of the complaint procedure.

Version 4

As a district committed to a continuous progress concept, the Board recognizes students must be provided an opportunity to progress at their own learning rates. As long as the district maintains identifiable grade levels, it may be in the student's best interest to remain at the same grade level in order to attain the desired skill mastery.

Should a student be recommended for retention, the administrative procedure will be followed.

Retention for Students Grades 1-8

If a teacher feels it is in the student's best interest to repeat a grade level, the following steps must be taken.

1. By mid-February, teachers of retention candidates will have made initial contact with parents.
2. Retention candidates will be referred to the Building Support Team (BST) for staffing and intervention. The BST will use the retention checklist and the retention data collection form in compiling information about the student.
3. By mid-April, the second parent contact will be made and permission secured for retention testing.
4. The BST will review the information collected on each student, ensure that all necessary information is at hand, and make a tentative determination of the instruments to be used in the evaluation.
5. The testing team will conduct evaluations on identified students in each building.
6. At the conclusion of the testing, the testing team will review all information on the retention candidates and make recommendations known to the BST.

7. A conference with the parents of each child tested will be conducted.
8. Parent/principal/special services director endorsement/approval secured.

(Reprinted with permission of the Oregon School Boards Association)

National Association of School Psychologists Position on Student Retention

The National Association of School Psychologists is committed to promoting educational practices that are demonstrably effective in enhancing the educational attainment of all children. The retention of students, while widely practiced, is in large measure not substantiated by sound research.

The cumulative evidence indicates that retention decisions cannot be validated using any standardized or competency-based tests and that retention can negatively affect achievement and social/emotional adjustment.

Retention has not been shown to be successful

- when employed in lieu of other, more effective interventions when students fail to learn;
- when it is used to postpone or supplant special education services;
- when it is used at the secondary level where it correlates positively with student dropout rates;
- when retention or delayed school entrance is used with students with social or behavioral deficits linked to "developmental immaturity."

Retention is less likely to be harmful when students

- lack serious academic deficits in the year prior to retention;
- have positive self-esteem and good social skills;
- show signs of difficulty in school because of lack of opportunity for instruction rather than lack of ability; and
- do not have serious social, emotional or behavioral deficits.

Therefore, it is resolved that the National Association of School Psychologists will

1. encourage early identification and intervention of academic, behavioral, and/or emotional difficulties to avoid the inappropriate use of retention;
2. encourage use of interventions other than retention for students in academic difficulty;
3. promote and publicize research comparing retention to alternative intervention practices at the kindergarten and first grade level with children determined to be at risk for school failure;

4. encourage school psychologists to assist in the decision-making process about retention of individual students by examining:
   a. the child's school and developmental history,
   b. reasons for school failure (e.g., emotional problems, low ability, frequent school moves or absences),
   c. the effectiveness of instruction (e.g., teaching practices, the match between teaching and learning style and between student achievement level and curricular demands),
   d. the type and quality of alternative strategies (e.g., direct instruction, remedial services, cooperative learning, peer tutoring, etc.),
   e. student attitude toward retention and level of parental support, and
   f. the extent of alternative programming available in both the new and repeated grades;
5. encourage state affiliate organizations and individual members to adopt positions and support research that promote alternative interventions to retention.

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